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## THE MORALITY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.

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CERTAIN difficulties stand in the way of any present attempt to estimate the morality of the Old Testament:

1. It is not easy to criticise the Old Testament as a whole: (a) It is not a literary unit. It is not a "book," except in the sense that it forms a principal part of the volume which we call the Bible, and has often been stitched and bound together between two covers. It is really a literature, comprehensive and various in contents, form, and style. (b) While it is a product of the thought and speech of a single ancient people, it is a growth of many centuries, and an exponent of several different stages of civilization and varieties of social and political life.

2. It is not always easy to get the complete and precise immediate meaning of the writers. The language, though lending itself readily to translation into modern speech, is nearly as difficult to interpret in English as in Hebrew. Its prose as well as its poetry abounds in unfamiliar modes of figurative expression, especially many elusive forms of synecdoche and hyperbole.

3. The whole intellectual world of the writers differed essentially from ours. Their social and political differences, great as they were, are not our chief impediment. Their views of humanity itself, of its relations to the universe and to the Deity, of its activities and its destiny, were radically dissimilar to ours. Their conceptions of the character of God are not always consistent with one another, nor is the advanced literary age of any writer a guarantee of comparative clearness. It is a psalmist of one of the later centuries who thus addresses Jehovah (Ps. 18:26; *cf.* Deut. 32:5):

With the pure thou dost deal purely,  
And with the crooked thou dost deal tortuously.

The key that may unlock the hidden meaning—a knowledge of

the racial consciousness, or of the processes of national life and of typical individual experience, or of the growth of schools of religious thought—is hard to find, and, when found, hard to fit and turn by reason of the rust of long disuse.

4. An obstacle of more general character is the uncertainty and variability of ethical canons. By what standard are we to judge of the ethical quality of this or that utterance of any Old Testament writer?

The first three difficulties cannot be further dealt with here. We must content ourselves with the mere indication of their character. But the last named, in the nature of the case, must be at once removed, or at least so far reduced as that it may not entirely bar our progress. The usual answer to our question would probably be that the best standard of judgment is the Christian consciousness of our own time. With this we must, in the main, content ourselves. We may, however, make one distinction of vital importance. There are several things approved or tolerated by the Old Testament writers which our modern moral sense condemns. Such, for example, are the practices of polygamy, slaveholding, and arbitrary divorce. Here we must distinguish between practices which are wrong in themselves and those which were (or are) permissible under certain conditions, but are normally reprehensible. The latter class fall under the head of social institutions, which, along with the approving sentiments of the community, are gradually eliminated by the Christianizing and humanizing of society. Of the former we may say that they were wrong from the very beginning. Thus it will be generally agreed that it was always wrong to lie, to steal, to cheat, to murder. On the other hand, there was an innocent or beneficent, as well as a noxious and improper, use of the relations once approved, but now condemned. Thus it was always wrong to abuse or oppress a slave or a wife. Accordingly, the conditions and standards of moral obligations may, in certain important departments of life, be modified by the change or readjustment of social institutions.

It is, however, not always an easy or a grateful task to apply the distinction just made. Courses of action are tolerated and

even approved in certain sections of the Old Testament which, though condemned by the spirit of Christianity, are yet encouraged by our Christian society. The chief of these is aggressive warfare with its attendant and consequent evils and horrors. The discussion of this phase of the subject, while difficult and ungrateful, is in the highest degree wholesome and instructive; for it helps, not only to a clearer understanding of the Bible, but to the purifying and quickening of the modern Christian conscience.

But even more difficult and important than an agreement upon subjective standards or canons of morality are the objective criteria of our moral judgments upon the Old Testament. In other words, it is easier to agree upon the question as to what classes of recorded actions or sentiments are wrong or right, than to agree upon the question as to what are the marks by which the Old Testament writers indicate their moral character or status. Confusion and misunderstanding upon this point threaten to be endless, possibly because the matters at issue have been dealt with in the arena of controversy more often than in the field of inquiry. One may, however, venture to offer tentatively the following working criteria. We may inquire:

1. What do the Old Testament writers directly approve or insist upon?
2. What are the deeds or characteristics of the Old Testament heroes or worthies?
3. What attributes are ascribed to the Deity? What does he enjoin? What does he approve? What does he condemn?

A few typical instances from the historical books may now be tested by one or other of the above criteria.

In Gen. 12:10 ff. it is related of Abram that he went to Egypt, and while there contrived to have his wife Sarai made a member of the Pharaoh's household, under the pretense that she was his sister, and for the purpose of saving his own life and fortunes. In Gen., chap. 20, essentially the same story is told of Abraham and his wife Sarah at Gerar, after their change of name: while in Gen., chap. 26, Isaac, son of Abraham, is alleged to have acted with regard to his wife Rebekah much in the same

way in the same territory of Gerar. All these accounts are naïve and primitive to the last degree, and are evidently the working over in different forms of a single tradition. It is generally believed that these narratives of Abram and Abraham do not proceed from the same writer, though this consideration does not greatly affect the present issue.

At first the stories seem to be told as an illustration of the lax marital obligations of the earliest fathers of the race; and they no doubt rest in some way upon an actual basis of fact. But it soon becomes evident that they are written for the purpose of showing that God protected the "father of the faithful" and his "child of the promise" throughout their career. It is not to be supposed that the conduct of the patriarchs here detailed could be defended by the moral standards of the narrators or of their age (eighth century B. C.). They probably regarded it as natural and inevitable among nomads of bygone days. But Abraham and Isaac, though by their latest biographers they were thus viewed as children of their own time in their habits of life, were also viewed by them as special wards of Jehovah, and therefore protected by him from all harm, even from the consequences of their own heedless or evil acts. This is plain from the fact that in this first account it is said that "Jehovah plagued Pharaoh with great plagues on account of Sarai Abram's wife" (Gen. 12: 17); while in the second account a similar judgment is narrated in detail (20: 17 f.). In the second narrative it is at the same time declared that God (Elohim) assured Abimelech, the "king" of Gerar, of his innocence of any wrongdoing (20: 6). And yet God warns him in the same revelation that he and his household would all surely die if Sarah were not restored. If, however, she were given back, Abraham as a "prophet" would pray for him, and his life would be spared.

There can, therefore, be no doubt as to the purpose of the writers in presenting the story. We notice, further, that, while Abraham's part in the matter was played without external prompting, his extrication from the natural consequences is ascribed to Jehovah. Further, while the guilty Abraham escapes with impunity, and is in fact greatly enriched through his arti-

fices, the guiltless Abimelech (or Pharaoh) was threatened with death and severely punished. The sacrosanct character of the patriarch becomes more manifest when we compare with the present accounts the other narratives that make up his biography. The dominant motive everywhere is the assumption that the great ancestor of the race was a favorite of God, divinely protected and blessed all through his days, and, as the instance before us shows, quite irrespectively of his moral conduct.

In general it may be said that morality and religion, in our sense of the terms, had little or nothing to do with the fortunes of Abraham. The significance of this fact for our present purpose lies in the consideration that the writers attribute the allotments of his life directly to God himself. Noteworthy is the designation "prophet" applied to Abraham. This is the only instance of its application to any of the patriarchs. But there is an echo of this very narrative in one of the Psalms (105: 14 f.):

He suffered no man to do them wrong;  
Yea, he reproved kings for their sakes,  
(Saying) Touch not my anointed ones,  
And do my prophets no harm.

What would have been our conception of a Hebrew prophet if it had been based upon this patriarchal example and its later reproduction? As a prophet, Abraham is, "on the one hand, an intimate of God, whose property no one may touch with impunity, and, on the other, a man who by the power of his prayer can play the rôle of mediator between God and man" (Dillmann). But in making up for ourselves a list of genuine biblical prophets we would do well to omit from the catalogue one whose claim to the title is made to rest upon his intercession with God for the pardon and relief of a man whom he himself had grossly deceived and whose life he had thereby endangered! It is no less a moral necessity that we refuse our homage and reverence to the God here portrayed, or rather that we fail to recognize the God of "revelation" in the alleged God of these wretched escapades.

We may now notice the next important biography, that of Jacob. His story exemplifies even more strikingly than that of

Abraham the guiding motive of the patriarchal narratives. To the moral aspects of his life till his return from Mesopotamia to Canaan there is no need to make more than a general reference. If I were to recount the details, I should merely recall to the reader a career of systematic deceit and treachery, prompted by greed and ambition, and pursued without hesitation or remorse. The story is more lifelike than that of Abraham and, being more normal, reflects a later stage of social development. It is a faithful portraiture of nomadic life in some of its most unfavorable aspects. What, however, is most striking is that here again, and more explicitly than in the case of Abraham, the divine favor is said to have been extended to the transgressor of moral law in connection with the transgression itself. Indeed, the very climax of prosperity is reached just after the final recorded deception has been carried out. It has been the custom to say that Jacob's family troubles in his later years were a punishment for the moral delinquencies of his earlier life. There is no hint of this in the record; but if any such reflection had been noted, it would have been inconsistent with the plain tenor of the narrative as a whole.

These two outstanding instances—the career of Abraham and that of Jacob, as narrated in the book of Genesis—present phenomena of surpassing importance. The moral standpoint of the writers seems, at first sight, incredibly low and false. No respectable pagan, whether in the disguise of a Christian or without it, has ever assumed or defended it. It stands in glaring contrast to that of the higher Old Testament consciousness—for instance, to that of the writer of Ps. 73 and the book of Job, who vex themselves over the apparent contradiction to the divine order of things implied by the prosperity or the sufferings of the righteous. In the stories of Genesis we find ourselves in a strange and perplexing moral and theological region, where the most rudimentary ethical notions are seemingly set at naught or ignored. One might almost fancy that the primeval darkness had not yet been lifted from the moral universe, and that the most favored people of mankind were still in a state of ethical chaos. To add to our confusion, the narrators, though having much to say about

the religion of the patriarchs, express no judgments whatsoever about their morals, and present to us, without comment, as realities, and even as results of the direct action of the Deity, moral conditions the very suspicion of whose existence in Jehovah's world arouse the amazement and indignation of their inspired successors. As he himself tells us, it was in a frenzy of desperation and in momentary forgetfulness of the cause of God and his people that the psalmist said (Ps. 73:12):

Behold, these are the wicked,  
And always at ease they increase in riches.

And it was when goaded to anguish and despair that the loyal-hearted Job cried out (9:24):

The earth is given into the hand of the wicked;  
and (12:6):

The tents of robbers prosper,  
And they that provoke God are secure.

But something like these very sentiments would seem to be encouraged by certain deliberately written portions of the patriarchal history.

If we cannot remove the moral difficulties here presented to the interpreter of Scripture, we may at least attempt a partial explanation. In the record, as we have it, the patriarchs play a three-fold rôle. First, they are heroes of popular tradition; some of the stories that were circulated about them from generation to generation were embodied and retained in the national histories, for this was all that the compilers could learn directly about their ways and doings. Secondly, they were the founders of the people and ultimately of the nation of Israel. Jehovah was from the beginning the tribal and national God, and therefore the ancestors of the race were his worshipers, and he their inseparable and inalienable protector. Thirdly, the stories told of the patriarchs apparently do not make up the whole of the material of early tradition. In the biography of Jacob, in particular, there is seemingly a reflex of later history. There is a striking correspondence between the fortunes of Jacob and Esau in the patriarchal narrative, and the historical careers of Israel and Edom, respectively. In fact, the record seems almost to say so, when



it is stated that Jacob is Israel and Esau is Edom. Israel, on the whole, as compared with the surrounding nations in their pitiful fates, had, by the eighth century B. C., prospered greatly, and was rightly held to have been specially favored by God. This was the outstanding fact and dominant sentiment in the minds of the compilers of the histories.

Now, there is certainly a difference in kind and perhaps also in degree, between the responsibility of an individual and that of a nation for their respective acts. And, in view of the outcome of a successful national policy, it is hard to disassociate the authors of the policy from the nation itself. Upon the one is reflected the glory of the other. Success and prosperity are also naturally held to be tokens of divine favor and guardianship. Thus the sacred writers, having still in large measure the tribal consciousness, and, identifying the founders of the race with the race itself in an indivisible solidarity, not only attributed to the founders the achievements of the race, but actually characterized the latter while in form and figure they delineated the former. Before condemning this mode of presentation, we should think of the intellectual, social, and political interval separating us from the authors of the early Hebrew histories, and endeavor with patient sympathy and study to enter into their ways of looking at the facts of life and history, and of expressing their impressions of these facts.

Further, we should not expect from these antique chroniclers and historians a higher ethical standard than that of the majority of the members of the modern Christian church, whose ideal politicians are diplomatic tricksters and conspirators, whose military heroes are raiders and assassins in the army uniforms of Christian nations, and who applaud or condone acts of aggression and spoliation on the ground that the cause of righteousness and freedom in the world is thereby promoted. We cannot judge of any far-away people, or its moral and intellectual records, entirely from the outside. To put ourselves in its place is the first condition of appreciation, and it will be helpful to us in criticising tribalistic ethics to remember that in national, and especially in international, matters we ourselves are still largely

controlled by the surviving tribalistic consciousness, and that it is a practical ethical question for ourselves to determine how far in our prepossessions and passions we have been putting the present-day nation or empire in the place of the clan or the tribe of our primitive forefathers.

So far I have dealt intentionally with the least favorable or least promising aspects of Old Testament ethics, for these have been the occasion of most scruple and controversy. Not as annulling or canceling, but as supplementing, these dubious passages of early Scripture, we may call to mind the provisions of the legal codes, with their strict regard for the rights of individuals, sometimes even of aliens, as against the instincts of rapacity and revenge inherited from primitive savagery. Of their conservation of some tribalistic practices, and their inadequate mitigation of others, I need not say anything here; it is sufficient for the present purpose to indicate the most obvious works of progress. It is really immaterial to say, in the way of objection, that a great deal of the best in these digests of law had already been promulgated among a people kindred to the Hebrews, in the code of Hammurabi, a thousand years before. We are not interested just now in the age or ultimate literary sources of these documents, but in their ethical contents and significance.

On a level higher still must be put the precepts and principles of the Decalogue, and the matchless story of Joseph, son of Jacob.

*[To be completed in the next number.]*